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ABSTRACT

Defninig rhetorical analysis as a means of studying writer/audience relationships allowing both intrinsic and extrinsic analysis, the author discusses the three sections of Levertov's poem, "From a Notebook: October '68--May '69." Section 1 is the speaker's personal comparison of her associations with life and death, comparison of herself to literary personae, and a view of her age and education as preparation for the revolutionary commitment she has made. Section 2 is a more personal and philosophical underpinning of the speaker's commitment. The third section finalizes the speaker's definition of revolution: the antithesis of death, the counterpart of life. The poem is then examined in relation to Levertov's biography and as a process of the speaker's working through language to the committed stand toward revolution which she finally adopts and acts on. (TS)

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A Rhetorical Analysis of Denise Levertov's "From A Notebook: October '68--May '69"*

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by

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In her article on engaged poetry, Denise Levertov speaks of the poet's social obligation to be a voice for those unable to verbalize their thoughts and emotions. She reveals even greater consciousness of the poet's awareness of his audience by espousing the idea that poems may move listeners to action.[1] Her emphasis is on the relationship of a poem to an audience.

Rhetorical analysis is a means of studying writer/audience relationships, allowing both intrinsic and extrinsic analysis of a poem. The text remains the basis for speculation about the disposition of the audience, the probable effects of the work on the audience, and the nature and attitude of the poet. Considering Levertov's concern with the poem's relationship to an audience, the rhetorical method is a feasible starting point in studying some of her poems, notably "From a Notebook: October '68--May '69."[2]

Most readers find allusions in literature intriguing if they don't despair before discovering the referents for the allusions. The reader of Levertov's "Notenook" might be tempted to explicate allusions. However

*Slightly revised after presentation.

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fascinating such a study might be, it will reveal little of the core of the poem.

Virtually every contemporary reader knows who Mayor Daley is and what People's Park is. Students of literature will recognize lines from Keats and Hopkins. They may know Barrie's The Admirable Crichton and Denis Saurat's philosophical Death and the Dreamer.

Less obvious is the identity of David Worstell, Dennis Riordon, and Jennie Orvino (possibly members of the Milwaukee Fourteen who destroyed 1-A draft files in the fall of 1968). But the poem reveals that Chuck Matthei is a draft resister, and the other men mentioned are probably associated with this movement as closely as they seem to be associated with each other in the poem. Their specific identity is not as important as the revolution in which all participate. And the most important rebel in "Notebook" is the speaker.

Early in the poem the speaker reveals an intention to persuade the reader to make a decision for revolution instead of death. A voice asks: "Which side are you on?" Although the voice addresses the speaker in the poem, she invites all to answer with her: "Revolution, of course. Death is Mayor Daley." Thus, one method for revealing the speaker is viewing her as a persona making rhetorical choices for pragmatic purposes.

From the seventh line of the poem, the reader knows that the speaker has made her choice of the world of the draft resisters, the world of those "not waiting for demolition and reconstruction" but beginning here. Section i of Part I is a strong statement of commitment--not irresponsible, not angry, but strong and committed.

The remainder of Part I reveals the logical considerations the speaker made before reaching her conclusion that death is the antithesis not

only of life but also of revolution. Without revolution and change, physical life is metaphorical death.

With Keats the speaker agrees that death is lovely; it provides "a drowsy numbness" that is easier than facing life's responsibilities. Indeed, the speaker in "Notebook" asserts that "Love/aches me" but still offers herself and her readers the alternatives "revolution or death." The reader already knows the speaker's choice. The chant becomes a haunting challenge.

In her scrape with death while flagging down a cab, the speaker finds that death is poor and trivial. As a result "The will to live/pulses." Section v of Part I projects "revolution or death" into the pulse beat so that the choice is as inescapable as life itself pulsing through the body. Lorie's escape from death offers courage to the speaker's continued life. Bill Rose's death offers the same "will to live," for his "life/failed him in some way long before death." The speaker believes she can make more of her life; she has reached a decision.

In the biographical section, she struggles with language as a means of expressing herself to a reader. "I choose/revolution but my words/often already don't reach forward," she laments. A person in her late forties, the speaker finds her diction marks her as untrue to her time. She is a spokesman not for her contemporaries but for a younger generation of draft resisters and those proposing the first revolution "that laughter and pleasure aren't shot down in." Goldengrove is unleaving all around her as she discovers, like Margaret of Hopkins' poem "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child," that it is not change that she weeps for but herself, unable verbally to bridge a generation gap.

In Part I the speaker's rhetorical strategies are comparison of personal associations with life and death, comparison of herself to literary personae, and a view of her age and education as making her fit for the commitment she has made. Part I is not an ambivalent statement of the speaker trying to make a decision for revolution. She expresses a sadness at her failures to communicate accurately; she recalls with some pain events that helped her decide. But in Part I the speaker is explaining a decision already made.

In "Entr'acte" the speaker delights in the change in seasons that Margaret found distressing. However, in this world the speaker also sees "terror of a kind:/black-and-white photo world." She draws back in retrospect from the strong statement of Part I; she savors the naturalistic influences on her decision. Recollection is a joy as she envisions and "captures" memories: "Again to hold-- 'capture' they say--/moments and their processions in palm/of mind's hand."

She refers to time as "a communion wine," a spiritually nourishing dimension. In Denis Saurat's scheme, time "is not a sequence . . . but radiates/out from a center." It is a pulsation as revolution is a pulsation, as life is a pulsation. In "Entr'acte" the rhetorical strategy underpinning the speaker's commitment is more personal and philosophical than in Part I.

Part II is an effort "To dig down,/to re-examine." The speaker has not altered her position. Instead it becomes "pervasive" and more intense--it "roars,/a toneless constant." In this section the definition of revolution--the antithesis of death, the counterpart of life--becomes finalized. Revolution is not merely an exchange; "a new life/isn't the old life in reverse." Revolution is pulsating, is alive. The speaker is

excited with revolution as constructive force, "vegetation recomposing."

The speaker is obviously sympathetic to members of the draft resistance movement such as Chuck Matthei. However, Part II indicates her first active participation in the revolution she has chosen. The first part of the poem is a statement of position. In the last two sections of Part II, the speaker reveals her part in the Battle at Berkeley. Finally, this activity results in a dynamic force not realized in the poem before. Now she views revolution as a living force personified beyond the metaphor of life she attributes to it earlier. Now it "raises itself out of the heavy/flood." And she ends with her quiet yet solid statement: "Islands/step out of the waves on rock feet." The primary persuasive device in Part II is the speaker's total commitment, her willingness to participate and to act rather than merely protest verbally.

The poem's development through Parts I and II is both example and extension of Levertov's theory of engaged poetry. The poet is engaged, first, if he can communicate "in ways unavailable to all the people who are not poets" those thoughts and feelings of other men. The engaged poet has the obligation to "serve his gift, to be a tongue, a voice."[3] The speaker in Part I struggles to find words for a younger generation so that she may be a voice for them. Thus, Part I in its verbal protest is the poet/speaker fulfilling this obligation of communication for men concerned as she is concerned.

Part II with its commitment as opposed to mere protest mirrors the second aspect of engagement for the poet. Levertov calls poems written merely out of opinion or a sense of duty propaganda, not poetry." ". . . opinion and a sense of duty are not <u>sources</u> of poetry. But anguish is. . . ."[4] This anguish can stimulate poems which are revolu-

tionary and will influence others to action, poems which are totally engaged in the anguish of the human situation today. These poems can influence others to action just as the working through in this poem brought the speaker to a commitment to action.

Reference to the speaker as "she" is not without design. Robert M. Browne asserts that "we sometimes use the term rhetoric to apply to this internal rhetoric of the poem, and consider its speakers rhetoricians."[5] Thus, the speaker in "Notebook" can be viewed as a rhetorician. However, Corbett suggests that a full rhetorical analysis reads back from the text to the author as well as to the speaker/rhetorician in the text.[6]

Some clues in the text suggest a female writer. The poem "A Man" was written "of Mitch." Perhaps a woman would feel the kind of panic described in a near auto/pedestrian mishap. An impressionistic critic would assume that the author is poet, revolutionary, a person in his late forties, a student of literature, a participant in draft resistance and in the Battle at Berkeley. A study of Levertov biographically validates these facts.

Levertov's birth and childhood duplicate what the speaker describes. She is married to Mitchell Goodman and wrote a poem entitled "A Man," most of which she quotes in "Notebook." Both she and her husband were vocal protesters against the war in Viet Nam. Goodman organized Resist, the adult counterpart to the draft-age youth group. He was also a co-defendant in the Spock trial. Miss Levertov wrote numerous poems protesting the war and initiated the "Writers' and Artists' Protest Against the War in Viet Nam," a group which sponsored protest read-ins. She is a teacher and a poet and a woman overwhelmingly committed to revolution against injustice. She has accepted her own challenge that poets "who

are able to write directly engaged poetry must not only do so, they must back up their words with deeds."[7]

The feature of "Notebook" that continues to arrest the student of the poem is the honesty and directness of the speaker. Ideally the rhetorical criticism would reach beyond the speaker to the audience and the issues both in the text and within the social milieu. This brief analysis can only hope to describe the speaker, touching on some rhetorical features. The argument is rational, poetic, and didactic. The power of the poem seems to reside in the personality of the speaker, her ethos.

Sensing these features of the rhetorically structured text, the critic is inclined to study the poem as a persuasive piece directed both to the speaker herself and to an implied listener she hopes will be sympathetic to her philosophy. However, the listener overhears rather than being directly addressed throughout the poem. (Essentially the poem is a process of the speaker's working through the poem to the committed stand towards revolution which she finally adopts and acts upon.) But at the same time she is "engaged" with the human condition and provides a voice for others who are revolting but are unable to verbalize about their revolt. Those for whom she speaks are an indirect audience.

Accepting the speaker as a direct representation of the poet allows a reading back from the text to both rhetorician and poet. The poet's choice of a personal and honest "I" as speaker is in itself a rhetorical device. Although the speaker's intensity in the poem is believable and persuasive, knowledge of the accuracy of the poem as an expression of Levertov's experiences makes this an even more powerful manifesto for revolution and change.

FOOTNOTES

[1]"On Engaged Poetry," Chelsea, October 1968, pp. 208-11.

[2]"From a Notebook: October '68--May '69" appears in Re-learning the Alphabet (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1970) and in To Stay Alive (Norfolk: New Directions, 1971). Other books of poetry by Levertov are The Double Image (London: The Cresset Press, 1946), Here and Now (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957), Overland to the Islands (Highland, North Carolina: Jargon Press, 1958), With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads (Norfolk: New Directions, 1960), The Jacob's Ladder (Norfolk: New Directions, 1961), O Taste and See (Norfolk: New Directions, 1964), The Sorrow Dance (Norfolk: New Directions, 1966), Footprints (Norfolk: New Directions, 1972). Levertov also translated Eugene Guillevic's Selected Poems (Norfolk: New Directions, 1969).

[3]"On Engaged Poetry," p. 208.

[4]"On Engaged Poetry," p. 209.

[5]Quoted in Edward P. J. Corbett, Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. xx.

[6]Corbett, p. xxviii.

[7]"On Engaged Poetry," p. 210.

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